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RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 0482
RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY 9965
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY 3757
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY 4792

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 000417

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KWBG](#) [KPAL](#) [IT](#)

SUBJECT: ITALIAN FM'S TRIP TO LEBANON AND SYRIA

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Classified By: Charge Elizabeth L. Dibble for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Foreign Minister Franco Frattini conducted a two-day visit to Lebanon and Syria, where he found both governments openly positive about the new U.S. administration's policies and suggested this emergence of optimism provides an opportunity to make progress on the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). Both the Lebanese and Syrian leadership shared their concerns that the recent election in Israel signals a shift to the right within the Israeli electorate. End summary.

Enthusiasm for US Administration

¶2. (C) On April 9, MFA Chief of Staff Alain Economides briefed the Charge on Frattini's trip to Lebanon and Syria. Frattini was in Lebanon on April 7 and met with President Sleiman, Prime Minister Siniora, Foreign Minister Salloukh and Parliamentary Speaker Berri. Frattini then traveled to Damascus for a dinner with Syrian Foreign Minister al-Moallem and then on April 8, met with Syrian President Assad. Frattini found great enthusiasm and appreciation for President Obama and the new U.S. administration in both countries, Syrian President Assad included. Economides described this encouraging viewpoint as "a new day". He also emphasized that there are great expectations of what the US administration can accomplish in the MEPP and noted that there is an opportunity for progress.

Lebanon Concerned with Israeli Election

¶3. (C) Lebanese President Suleiman told Frattini he is concerned that the Israeli population, with this recent election, has moved to the right. Sleiman thought that the U.S. should use its influence and convince Israeli PM Netanyahu to work harder in making progress on peace. Economides said that Israeli's use of cluster bombs caused significant negative backlash and created problems for UNIFIL since they provide demining assistance.

Lebanon's Upcoming Election

¶4. (C) Parliamentary Speaker Berri told Frattini that he expected a unity government would prevail in the upcoming election and that Hizballah was keeping a low profile in the election run-up, as they did not want to win an overwhelming majority, but simply remain in government. Economides added that UNIFIL also believes Hizballah is keeping a low profile in UNIFIL's area of operation.

An Optimistic Syria

15. (C) Frattini's Syrian interlocutors were positive about the new U.S. administration and were waiting to see the U.S. administration's early policy initiatives on MEPP. Assad noted that Syria could help future initiatives and was prepared to work with the international community. Assad told Frattini, however, that the west needed to talk directly to Hamas, negotiate with those who have influence, and "not be so touchy" about engaging those who are interested in negotiating.

16. (C) Economides noted that the Syrians are concerned, not with the specific people or personalities voted into the Israeli government, but by the larger shift of the populace to more right-leaning policies. The Syrians want the U.S. to pressure Israel to make concessions on the MEPP. Syrian officials questioned who would monitor the Golan Heights, if Israeli did withdraw, as it is not Lebanese land, and wondered if UNIFIL might fill the role.

Frattini's Press Remarks Focus on Israel

17. (C) In both countries, Frattini publicly urged Israel to withdraw from the village of Ghajar, on Lebanon's border with the Golan Heights, to show collaboration and compliance with UNSCR 1701. Frattini also publicly stated that as the G8 President, Italy will work with the EU and U.S. to encourage the new Israeli government to resume peace negotiations and boost the international community's effort toward a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Comment

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18. (C) Frattini and his staff were impressed with the sense of openness expressed by their interlocutors in Lebanon and Syria and see an opportunity to make significant steps in the MEPP in the wake of the new U.S. administration's outreach to the region.

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